

Real Stories

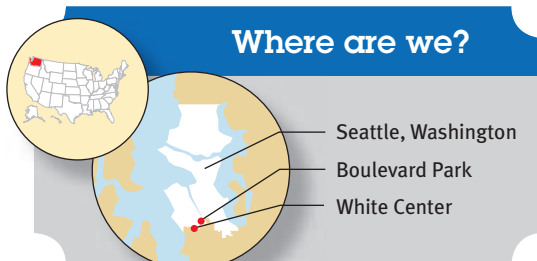


Meet the people who live in *Making Connections* neighborhoods

Ngy Hul/Trusted Advocates

Ngy Hul knew that if the people of White Center wanted a better life for themselves and their children, they had to have a voice—a say in their future. But organizing people is no small task, especially in a community where 40 languages are spoken. Taquerias, adult video stores, and Asian groceries line the main street of White Center. Small, aging homes, public housing, and apartment buildings flank the streets nearby. Eighty-nine percent of the elementary-school children in the neighborhood qualify for free or reduced-fee lunches, and one third of the residents do not earn a living wage. How did this determined man and a group of bilingual organizers help their community find its voice? “If you’re going to cook a meal,” says Ngy, “you have to be willing to keep stirring until it’s cooked all the way through.”

White Center and **Boulevard Park** are neighborhoods south of Seattle, Washington, just starting to come back from decades of poverty, neglect, and crime. Home to a growing number of immigrant and refugee families, the neighborhoods reflect a rich blend of arts and cultures, new businesses, and a hard-won sense of optimism about the future. *Making Connections*, an initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, works with the people of White Center and Boulevard Park to marshal neighborhood residents, community groups, schools, government agencies, and business leaders in an effort to improve the lives of children and families in the neighborhoods.



Ngy Hul belongs to a growing community of refugees and immigrants who have settled in White Center and nearby Boulevard Park; their numbers have doubled in the last decade. Like Ngy, many people arrive from war-torn and impoverished nations with few possessions and knowing little English. They must master a new way of life without being able to read a street sign and scramble to find a job, register kids for school, and learn a new language.



Ngy left Cambodia and came to Seattle as a refugee in 1975 as the Khmer Rouge took over the country. During the next four years, a million and a half of his countrymen and women would starve, be executed, or die of disease in the infamous Cambodian killing fields. Ngy lost family members and friends.

“We were all in the same boat, just trying to cope with the nightmare we had lived through,” he says of the men and women arriving from Cambodia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia in the 1970s.



Ngy felt compelled by despair to do something “to make myself happy before I died,” he says. One day, he and some friends put a sign in their apartment window that read: “Cambodian Association of Washington State.” Soon shattered men and women, refugees like Ngy, began to turn up on the doorstep asking for help. Ngy found that serving others eased his anguish and gave meaning to his life.

“Alone, we would feel like failures in this new country,” he says. “Together, we learned to see that what we might have thought of as our individual failures could be turned into our collective success.”

Ngy and his friends, along with other Southeast Asian leaders, established what in time became known as the Refugee Federation Service Center, embracing refugees from all over the world. It is now the largest refugee assistance organization in the county.

The Refugee Federation has offices in White Center. Ngy knows all about the pressing needs of the families served by the federation, and he wanted to do more to help. Ngy believed that the key to real change was to involve people who lived in White Center in determining the future of their neighborhood—and their own lives. If things were going to change, people had to speak up about the policies and institutions affecting their lives; about what worked and what didn’t work.

“We wanted to hear the voice of the residents,” Ngy says. “We wanted to know what they thought.”

But organizing a neighborhood with as many different cultures and languages as White Center is no easy task. How do you communicate with people of such varied backgrounds? How do you get people who are worried about just getting by talking about the future?

Ngy began talking with bilingual community leaders who lived and worked in the neighborhood, all of them refugees and immigrants themselves—from Cambodia, Vietnam, Bosnia, Somalia, Mexico, and a dozen other lands. They knew their neighbors’ hopes and fears firsthand. All of them had worked long and hard on behalf of their communities in the mutual assistance organizations that serve immigrants and refugees in White Center. People trusted them. When they all finally met together, they recognized that they would be stronger if they worked as a group—a collective voice to advocate for change and bring people together.

“It was never about me and what I wanted,” says Ngy. “It’s always been about all of us, our collective vision. Not just one man—all of us. We saw what we could do together to help our communities. We did it together.”



Someone suggested the name Trusted Advocates for the group—about 15 men and women were in the original group; more have since joined—and it stuck. Soon the Trusted Advocates began canvassing cafés, street corners, service organizations, and temples. Their goal: to get people to turn out for a community meeting to discuss the future of White Center.

The community meeting had been called by The Partners, a coalition of state and local public agencies, businesses, and nonprofit organizations that included the Refugee Federation. Some people in the coalition wanted to hire professional facilitators, but the Trusted Advocates convinced meeting organizers that they should play a central role in the planning and conduct of the community meeting. After all, who knew the neighborhood better than the Trusted Advocates? “We felt we had expertise, not just as translators, but as people who knew these communities well,” Ngy says.



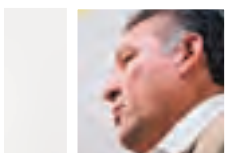
The Trusted Advocates’ strategy paid off. Three hundred people showed up at the first meeting. The day’s discussions—led by the Trusted Advocates, in 17 languages—yielded a clear picture of the community’s concerns and priorities and the direction people wanted to head in.

The community meeting was a turning point for White Center. Other meetings followed and soon work groups began the slow, exhilarating, and inevitably contentious process of putting the vision to the test in the real world.

Many obstacles remain, but in just a few years the community has pushed for—and won—a new Community School, a new multiservice center to house state and nonprofit social services, and training and hiring concessions for neighborhood residents on several multimillion-dollar construction projects.



The Trusted Advocates played a vital role in these victories, no small feat for a community “without a voice,” says Ngy. “Some of us, when we came here, we were missing a part of ourselves, we had been hurt so bad,” he says. “How as human beings can we see the suffering of others in the 21st century and turn away? Maybe we can work together—let’s gather all the losers in the world!—and make an optimistic change.”



Snapshot: White Center and Boulevard Park

- 32,000 people live in White Center and Boulevard Park.
- One in three families does not earn a living wage.
- One in five children lives in poverty—twice as many as in the county overall.
- The percentage of residents born outside the U.S. more than doubled during the 1990s.
- People of color make up 49 percent of the population.
- More than three times as many people as in the county describe their English as “limited.”
- More than 40 languages are spoken by residents of the neighborhoods.

Just the Facts

- ◎ More than a million immigrants and refugees come to live in the U.S. each year. The number of people in the U.S. born in another country reached 31 million in 2000, a 33 percent increase from 1990. Immigrants make up 11 percent of the U.S. population. [*U.S. Census*]
- ◎ One in five children in the U.S. is a child of immigrant parents. [*U.S. Census*]
- ◎ Immigrant children are more likely to go without health insurance, food, and adequate housing than children born here. Low wages paid to immigrant workers largely account for the hardships. [*The Urban Institute*]
- ◎ Immigrant workers in the U.S. contributed nearly \$500 billion *more* to the Social Security system from 1998 to 2002 than they received in benefits. [*National Research Council and National Academy of Sciences*]
- ◎ The average immigrant will pay about \$80,000 *more* in local, state, and federal taxes in a lifetime than he or she will receive in public benefits. [*National Immigration Forum*]

Get Connected

Want to learn more? Get involved? Get something going in your community? Here are some resources that can help:

Making Connections

Seattle/White Center
206-762-7760
www.mcskc.org

Refugee Federation Service Center

206-725-9181
For information about English-language classes and other services for refugees and immigrants.

Nonprofit Assistance Center

206-324-5850
For information about the Trusted Advocates, resident leadership training, and technical assistance.

www.refugeeweb.org

A portal for nonprofit associations representing refugee communities in the Pacific Northwest and providers of services, including ESL classes.

www.communityresourcebank.org

A virtual town plaza for immigrant and refugee communities and advocates to gather and share information. Chock-a-block with resources and links.

www.gcir.org/aecf

The Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees website offers resources, data, and links of use to philanthropists and advocates alike.



Making Connections

Making Connections, an initiative of The Annie E. Casey Foundation, works to improve the lives and prospects of families and children living in some of America's toughest neighborhoods. Common sense tells us that children do better when their families are strong, and families do better when they live in communities that help them to succeed. *Making Connections* works for real change in three areas:

- increasing opportunities for people to earn a decent living, save, and invest
- fostering close ties among family, neighbors, faith communities, and civic groups
- creating connections to reliable, respectful services close to home



The Annie E. Casey Foundation

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. Its mission is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that meet the needs of vulnerable children and families.

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